

Why is Simeon Dancing? The Unity of Exegesis, Theology and Devotion in the Work of Bonaventure

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INTRODUCTION

Bonaventure (+1274) is generally regarded as one of the central representatives of the earliest phases of Franciscan scholasticism, and as a mystical theologian and ecclesiastical statesman of the first rank. Despite this acknowledgement, Bonaventure's significant work as a biblical exegete has witnessed relative neglect from scholars.¹

While Bonaventure's academic exegesis is noted by Gilbert Dahan and others as important, particularly the Old Testament commentaries,² his exegetical writings have received far less scholarly attention than his other works. In recent years, the English translations of Bonaventure's academic commentaries on Luke, John and Ecclesiastes have begun to spur interest in this aspect of his corpus in the Anglophone world.³ Led by the work of the Franciscan Fr. Robert Karris, these translations hopefully will lead to more attention being given to the exegetical aspect of Bonaventure's work, and to its importance in reception history.⁴

Bonaventure's academic exegesis was by no means done in isolation from his theological and devotional concerns. While it is important to understand the various purposes and audiences of his work in different genres, they can and must be seen as mutually enriching each other. This is in stark contrast to what is so often the case today, where strict boundaries between academic exegesis and theology, and both of these areas and writings usually classified as "devotional," are still all too evident. This perpetuates what Ryan Brandt has aptly described as a bifurcation and polarization of "the otherwise

inseparable realities of academic reading and personal reading of Scripture.”⁵ But for Bonaventure, there is ultimately no separation of the work of the exegete from the spiritual guide, nor the theologian from the mystagogue. Ilia Delio has written eloquently of Bonaventure’s “propensity for integration, uniting faith and reason, intellectual and spiritual, speculative and symbolic, knowledge and love.”⁶ For Bonaventure, all genres were seen as the opportunity to pursue the imperative of seeking wisdom and living out the imitation of Christ, and while each genre had a specific purpose and to some degree particular methodology, they ultimately interweave and enrich one another in order to engage and integrate all the grace-illuminated faculties of human experience in pursuit of holiness. In order to apprehend the fullness of Delio’s suggestion about integration in Bonaventure’s work, it is necessary to include the way Bonaventure did his academic exegesis, and how this exegesis is reflected in his “devotional” works. Such an investigation illuminates the goal of integration of devotion and exegesis with theology, and presents the Seraphic Doctor as a much-needed model of how this spiritual unity of purpose can be recovered and achieved.

In order to illustrate this approach of Bonaventure, the present article analyzes Bonaventure’s exegesis of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, along with the closely-related Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an episode found in Luke 2: 22-39. The particular focus will be on how Bonaventure treats the elderly Simeon and Simeon’s canticle, known in Latin as the *Nunc Dimittis*. This topic is an appropriate choice to illuminate Bonaventure’s exegetical method for several reasons. Firstly, the episode plays an almost unique role in the later medieval devotional tradition, forming as it does, along with the Finding of Christ in the Temple at the age of Twelve, one of the

Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, but also one of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary. This complexity of the episode reflects that while the parents of Jesus are marveling at Simeon's words, the elderly man then prophetically indicates doleful things in Mary's future; as Robert Karris remarks, "In a stage whisper Luke announces the Cross."⁷ Secondly, in his commentary on Luke, Bonaventure himself will assert the unique importance of Simeon's canticle as an expression of the gospel, "the most brief capsulation of the evangelical story (*totius evangelicae historiae quaedam brevissima comprehensio*)."⁸ In this way he also will explain the appropriateness of Simeon's song in the daily prayer of the Church. Thirdly, this episode or Mystery is treated by Bonaventure in several different contexts or genres throughout his career: 1) The mystical devotional tract known as *The Tree of Life*;⁹ 2) five sermons on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin;¹⁰ 3) a short work of mystical liturgical theology known as *The Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*;¹¹ and 4) his *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. The fullness and complexity of his exegesis can best be illustrated by a comparison of his treatment of a particular scriptural episode in different texts and contexts. The figure of Simeon, representing as he does the hopes of Israel fulfilled at the moment of connection between the two Testaments, is ideal for this purpose. This article will focus on *The Tree of Life* and the *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, demonstrating how in one characteristic instance, the latter will illuminate his exegesis in the former, showing Bonaventure's mind and method at work and the unity of his spiritual vision.¹²

BONAVENTURE'S HERMENEUTICS

Bonaventure saw his exegesis of Scripture as intended to preach the Word of God and to aid preachers in their own exegesis, always motivated by charity. As he expresses it in his prologue to the *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, "Now to expound and teach the Gospel of God is to preach the divine word. And therefore, the teacher must be inflamed by fraternal love."¹³ His method reflects this ideal. As Robert Karris expresses it, "Briefly put, Bonaventure's hermeneutical method is to interpret Scripture by Scripture."¹⁴

This theory of scriptural interpretation is set forth succinctly in the prologue of his *Breviloquium*, a short compendium of theology meant for the training of his fellow Franciscans. Bonaventure identifies theology with Sacred Scripture; its origin is God; and it surpasses knowledge, but is geared toward human capacity; its end or fruit consists in eternal happiness. Faith in Christ is a fundamental prerequisite for understanding all of Scripture. Bonaventure describes the whole course of salvation history as being like a beautifully composed poem, but the reader must have a full and integral view of the poem, namely the whole of the two testaments to fully appreciate and comprehend its individual words and stanzas. In describing the depth of Scripture, he will point out the classic fourfold senses of Scripture, namely literal or direct; allegorical; moral or tropological; and anagogical, that is, what human beings should desire for eternal happiness.¹⁵ All of these four senses in turn correspond to Scripture's content, audience, source and final end. Each passage of Sacred Scripture, then, answering to all of these circumstances in ways most appropriate, provides the reader with a number of meanings from a single text.¹⁶

The end result of such exegesis, as Jean Gerson would aptly describe Bonaventure's approach a century and a half later, is to illuminate the mind and ignite the heart of the reader or listener.¹⁷ The key is for the exegete to possess a profound knowledge of all Scripture in order to bring appropriate Scriptural texts to bear in the analysis of a particular biblical episode. An excellent illustration of how Bonaventure implements these hermeneutical principles is found in his exegesis of the words and character of Simeon.

THE TREE OF LIFE

The *Lignum vitae*, or *The Tree of Life*, was destined to be one of Bonaventure's most popular works; it was soon translated into vernacular languages, and both edited and expanded upon during its long history of reception.¹⁸ Although not an academic commentary on Scripture, it nonetheless is a systematic reflection on the biblical story of salvation, and can be classified as "devotional exegesis." It is a profoundly Christocentric work, meant as a guide to providing the attentive reader with a way to meditate upon the life of Christ, from the existence of the Trinity before creation until the Second Coming and Judgment of the world. The title alludes to a parallel between the Cross as Tree of Life and the Tree of Life in paradise. The image of the life of Christ as a tree bearing manifold fruits for our salvation also provides the literary and imaginative structure of the work, and was actually accompanied by an illustration. The tree takes the form of the cross of the crucifixion, with twelve branches growing out from the central trunk; from each branch hangs fruit.

There are 48 short meditations on the mysteries of Christ, that is four for each branch, with each episode usually equated with a biblical episode. Each of these meditations is meant not only to inform the reader on the life of Christ, but also to relate each episode to the great truths of the Incarnation and its implications for our own lives. Furthermore, the person reading these meditations and making them their own is meant to encounter Christ as it were in person. Each meditation is subdivided into two parts, with the first being a description of the event itself (e.g. the Birth of Christ) or a truth of faith (e.g. Jesus as Begotten of God); then follows an inner response of the person meditating, often in the form of a prayer, which is meant to engender an emotional reaction to the mystery that is ultimately transformative. Keeping in mind the brevity of each meditation, Bonaventure displays important elements of his exegesis, in this case directed towards a specific spiritual aim.

Turning now to the text, Bonaventure treats the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, along with the Purification of the Virgin, as part of the Second Fruit (The Humility of his Mode of Life) under the heading “Jesus Submissive to the Law.” In this passage he will quote the gospel passages Luke 2:27 and Luke 2:29. The ensuing discussion explains the Gospel mystery in part by employing three other Scriptural quotations: namely Song of Songs 3:4 “I held him and would not let him go” and two from St. Paul combined into one: (Galatians 4:5): “that he might redeem those who were under the Law and (Romans 8:21) free them from the slavery of corruption to the freedom of the glory of the sons of God.”¹⁹

Bonaventure begins the meditation on the second fruit by reflecting upon the Circumcision of Christ, and then his Epiphany to the Magi. In his section on the

Presentation, he emphasizes that Jesus is Submissive to the Law. There are five points made in this paragraph, an admirably concise summary: 1) It was not enough for the teacher of perfect humility, the equal to the Father, to submit himself to the humble Virgin; 2) Jesus must also submit himself to the Law, and here are cited [Galatians 4:5 & Romans 8:21] to illustrate the purpose of this, namely our redemption and participation in glory; 3) Jesus wished that his mother, although most pure, should submit herself to the law of purification; 4) Jesus wished that he himself, the redeemer of all men, should be redeemed as a first born son and presented in the Temple to God; and 5) Jesus wished that an offering should be given for him in the presence of those just who were rejoicing.

This mention of rejoicing (*exsultantibus iustis*)²⁰ is quite interesting and, at least as far as the text itself goes, an interpretation. The scriptural text does not mention rejoicing per se, implied, at least arguably, though it might be by the description of Mary and Joseph as “marveling” (*mirantes*).²¹ For Bonaventure, however, this is not an incidental point, as he then follows his didactic exegesis with an exhortation to the reader to “Rejoice (*Exulta*).” First of all, this entails rejoicing with the blessed old man Simeon and the aged Anna. Along with this, echoing, although not explicitly acknowledging, the meaning of the feast in Greek, *hypapante*, he exhorts the listener/reader to “walk forth to meet the mother and child.”²²

Then Bonaventure moves to the romantic imagery of bridal mysticism and links it, interestingly, to imitating the behavior of the elderly Simeon with the infant Jesus: “Let love overcome your bashfulness; let affection dispel your fear. Receive the infant in your arms and say with the bride I took hold of him and would not let go (Song of Songs 3:4).”²³ Finally, and most extraordinary of all, the soul is exhorted “to dance with the

holy old man and sing with him!”²⁴ And he ends by quoting the first lines of Simeon’s song, the *Nunc Dimittis*, “Now dismiss your servant, Lord, according to your word in peace (Luke 2:29).”

Why does Bonaventure make this exegetical move to portray Simeon as dancing? Is it merely due to the wedding imagery hinted at? I will return to this point shortly. Within *The Tree of Life*, the episode ends on this note, which is somewhat surprising, given the other things Simeon will say, particularly his prophecy to Mary about Christ being the rise and fall of many, and that a sword will pierce her heart (Luke 2:34-35). But two additional things are worth noting. In the following section Bonaventure combines Jesus being exiled from his kingdom, i.e. the Flight into Egypt; and the Massacre of the Innocents, with Christ being slaughtered and killed in each child symbolically.²⁵ These sad and stressful episodes are followed by Mary and Joseph finding Jesus at the age of twelve in the Temple after searching for him. In reference to this scene in the Temple Bonaventure discusses the combination of Joy and Sorrow which attends this mystery.²⁶ Then, in a preview of language often associated with the Passion, Bonaventure asks, and has the reader ask with him, “Most beloved Son, how could you give such sorrow to your Mother, whom you love and who loves you so much?”²⁷ Much later in Fruit 7, His Constancy under Torture, Bonaventure directs a poignant address to the Virgin standing at the foot of the Cross, clearly a precursor of the great Franciscan liturgical poem, the *Stabat Mater*.²⁸ In doing so Bonaventure shifts to language which echoes the prophecy of Simeon which he had not mentioned earlier in his consideration of the Presentation itself:

“His most sweet mother, as the sword pierced the depths of your heart, when with devoted eyes he looked upon you standing before him and spoke to you these loving words: ‘Woman, behold your son,’ in order to console in its trials your soul, which he knew had been more deeply pierced by a sword of compassion than if you had suffered in your own body.”²⁹

Here Bonaventure clearly links the prophecy of Simeon in its sorrowful aspects to the Passion of Christ, as well as indicates the centrality of Mary as a full and complex participant in the life of Christ at every stage, and as someone whose emotional responses and fidelity can serve as a model for our own. In these brief examples of Bonaventure’s exegesis in *The Tree of Life*, there are many themes at work which Bonaventure illustrates more fully in his academic *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*.

COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Bonaventure’s long commentary on Luke’s gospel stands as a major example of early scholastic professional exegesis, a product as it was of his work as a master at the university of Paris. Following upon the work of Beryl Smalley and others, Gilbert Dahan has done a fine job of establishing some of the techniques and organization of this genre, and its outgrowth from earlier monastic exegesis and most importantly, the twelfth century exegesis of the cathedral schools.³⁰ Regarding Bonaventure’s Lukan commentary, Robert Karris writes “it is a scientific and scholarly commentary with wondrous materials for preachers.”³¹ It is still rarely noted in bibliographies on the subject, a lamentable neglect.³² Karris is correct in seeing this commentary as a mix of scientific exegesis and preacher’s aid. He convincingly dates the commentary not to 1248

when Bonaventure in his lectures was commenting in an elementary manner on the literal sense, but rather to 1257 when he was a master and was expected to give a more thorough commentary on a Gospel to prepare university students to be preachers.³³ This will include some discussion of the spiritual and allegorical sense, and Bonaventure will use thousands of Scriptural quotations to illustrate the fullest meaning of Luke's gospel. In addition to other passages of Scripture, Bonaventure will characteristically also make extensive use of church fathers, especially Ambrose, Gregory the Great and Bede, as well as more recent writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Cher, and the *Glossa Ordinaria*.³⁴

Bonaventure arranges his long commentary into four parts: 1) Luke 1-3: The Mystery of the Incarnation; 2) Luke 4-21: Christ's Magisterial Preaching; 3) Luke 22-23: The Medicine of the Passion; and 4) Luke 24: The Triumph of the Resurrection. He somewhat playfully notes how these four parts all support the overarching theme of this gospel, and are congruent with Luke's traditional profession as a medical doctor: "Although all these sections look to the perfection of history, their primary intent is with the priesthood of Christ and the medicine of the passion, and these required a physician as author."³⁵

The Presentation of Christ in the Temple is thus treated in the first part of the commentary. After discussing the events leading up to and including Christ's nativity, Bonaventure comes to a section entitled Luke 2: 21-52, which he describes as "[the] Humility of the Newborn Christ insofar as he was born under a threefold Law." Here it should be noted that this ties in with a major theme in all of his writings, namely

Bonaventure's assertion that the primary way we can practice *imitatio Christi* is through the virtue of humility.³⁶

Bonaventure explains that after the evangelist has demonstrated how Christ was born of a woman, Luke proceeds to stress the humility of Christ, with the key being that Christ 'was born under the law.' There are three types of precepts, namely sacramental, ceremonial and moral, and each will be shown in turn: 1) sacramental by his circumcision; 2) ceremonial is shown by his dedication; 3) moral is shown in Christ giving honour to God, specifically in the verse 2:52, "and the child advanced."³⁷ In Bonaventure's exegesis of the Circumcision, he will make creative use of the Dominican Hugh of St Cher, Bernard of Clairvaux's first, second, and third sermons on the Circumcision of the Lord, Bernard's Sermon for the Octave of Epiphany, and Pseudo-Bernard's *Treatise on Charity*.³⁸ Bonaventure makes it clear that Jesus did not accept circumcision for his own need, but in order to dispense salvation to others. He explains this in terms of quotations from Acts and Paul and the Gospels, and also various Old Testament books. After focusing on the salvific power of the name of Jesus, Bonaventure, drawing upon Gregory the Great, provides a masterful treatment of the symbolic importance of the eighth day, relating it to creation and resurrection, and also providing tropological and allegorical interpretations.

Having analyzed submission to the sacramental law as shown by the circumcision, Bonaventure then turns to Luke 2:22-39 to discuss submission under the ceremonial law. With the usual penchant for division and the symbolic importance of the number three, he asserts the threefold nature of this second submission: 1) the humiliation of Christ according to the law's precepts; 2) the clarification of Christ, beginning with the

appearance of Simeon in verse 25; and 3) the fulfillment of things that had been predicted, namely in v. 39.

The “humiliation of Christ” treats of the related mystery of the Purification of the Virgin, and also the legal aspects of Christ’s own Presentation in the Temple as a first-Integration born son. With regard to Mary, her Purification fulfills the obligation of Leviticus 12:2, 4; but following Bernard of Clairvaux’s Third Sermon on the Purification, Bonaventure is careful to stress the fact that Mary did not receive semen inside her, and thus the Blessed Virgin was not subject to this necessity of the law, but submitted out of humility. And here Bonaventure adds a quote from Esther 15:13, a book he employs often, “that this has been established for others, not your own sake.” He develops this point further, stressing that Mary was not actually bound by the Mosaic law, due to the unique nature of her maternity.³⁹

Moving on to the offering of the firstborn Jesus in the Temple, Bonaventure quotes Leviticus 12:8 with regard to the price of the oblation. Here, showing us his Franciscan heart, he comments on the wondrous poverty of Christ’s parents, that they do not own a lamb! The text separates the two offerings, to show that both are fitting for the Lord. The pigeon signifies the active life, the turtledove the contemplative life. Both of these renders a person acceptable to God.⁴⁰

Bonaventure asserts then there are three offerings around our total sacrifice which is the Lord Jesus. The first is the parents offering of Jesus, which invites us to humility. The second is the offering of birds made for him, which invites us to poverty; the third is the offering on the Cross for all, which invites us to dedication to God. Again, echoing Bernard’s Third Sermon on the Purification of Mary, the Franciscan stresses how Christ

submitted to this prescript of the law not because he was actually under the edict of the Law, but because it was his own will. Bonaventure then describes in masterful detail, drawing upon Bede, Gregory the Great, and his own biblically-saturated imagination, how numerous Old Testament passages bring out the spiritual meaning for the Christian soul of Mary's Purification and Christ's Presentation.⁴¹

From here Bonaventure leads the reader to the important appearance of Simeon. Bonaventure believes the figure of Simeon can be illuminated by the Old Testament in two ways: 1) many passages in the Wisdom literature refer to him, describe him, and are fulfilled in him, including his dancing; and 2) the Holy Spirit speaks directly to Simeon, and the Spirit primarily does so by speaking to him through Scripture. Along with this, Simeon and his prophetic song can best be illuminated by later New Testament texts, or to use an image from the *Breviloquium*, a knowledge of the whole biblical poem, so to speak.

Bonaventure proceeds to instruct that now that the humiliation of Christ had been shown by submission to the law, the evangelist will next describe Christ's clarification by means of a testimony to the truth. While Simeon is central to this witness, in order to be solid, the testimony must come from a plurality of witnesses. For this reason, both sexes, in this case also Anna, are introduced. They are authentic witnesses because both are prophetic and holy people. First comes Simeon, and to describe him Bonaventure will analyze three aspects in turn: 1) the merit of the one giving the testimony, which lays a solid foundation for belief; 2) the content of the testimony inspires one to admiration; 3) the self-denial of the witness, which inclines a person to compassion. This third point is

very interesting, as it implies the reader should have an emotional affective response, much like that expected by the reader of *The Tree of Life*.⁴²

With regard to the merit of the one giving the testimony, Bonaventure explains this in terms of Simeon possessing both “habit of virtue (*habitu virtutis*)” and “the spirit of truth (*spiritu veritatis*).”⁴³ These two attributes, the friar explains, render a person full of sanctity. He will first explain the habit or use of virtue, and its source, in terms of Simeon’s reputation (external), life style (internal), and grace (from above).

In treating of Simeon’s reputation, Bonaventure begins with the verse “[and] behold there was in Jerusalem a man, whose name was Simeon (Luke 2:25).” Here he applies various biblical verses to explicate the evangelist’s statement about Simeon. Thus, he explains how Jerusalem by its name was both regal and sacerdotal, a place for worship of God fully observed according to mandates of the Law.⁴⁴ Therefore, he continues, one can infer Simeon had a reputation for righteousness in the city. Bonaventure then applies three quotations from the Book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, to Simeon and his reputation, explaining that the Scripture in this way portrays Simeon the just man as essentially joyful. Sirach 15:5, 6 can be applied to Simeon as the “just man” as it speaks of the activity of Wisdom: “[and] in the midst of the church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with a robe of glory. She shall heap upon him a treasure of joy and gladness, and shall cause him to inherit an everlasting name.” Bonaventure also applies to Simeon the passages, Sirach 50:13 and 50:1, believing the attributes of the Simeon the high priest mentioned in these verses can be applied to the prophet Simeon for his own constant support of the Temple.⁴⁵

With regard to Simeon's "lifestyle (*vita*)," Bonaventure notes that Luke describes him as just, and to further explain this Bonaventure next quotes St. Anselm's *De Veritate* that justice is uprightness of the will, and then states how justice inclines a person on the way to rectitude.⁴⁶ He continues to quote the wisdom literature as an apt description of Simeon, including Wisdom 10:10; Proverbs 11:5; Proverbs 11:3; Sirach 1:27; Proverbs 15:27; Job 1:1. The very person of Simeon, and his presence in the Temple, teaches the reader what to flee, motivated by a proper fear of sin.

Besides Simeon being the fulfillment of Scriptural descriptions of the just man, Bonaventure tells how the Holy Spirit continued to speak to Simeon through the Scripture, especially on the theme of looking for the consolation of Israel: "Thus the Holy Spirit in a most powerful way said to him what is read in Habbakuk 2:3: 'If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.'"⁴⁷ The Old Testament passages explain Simeon's reputation and lifestyle. Bonaventure then explains how the evangelist turns to grace, when Luke's text continues "the Holy Spirit was with him." Bonaventure argues that the Spirit was present with Simeon through grace and love, characteristics of the new dispensation, and thus the full meaning of this text of Luke can best be understood by quotations from the New Testament, e.g. Romans 5:5 on the importance of hope, and 1 John 4:16 on love. Bonaventure also applies what is said of Stephen in Acts 6:5 to Simeon, as well as St. Paul's words on grace in I Corinthians 16:23.⁴⁸

This interweaving of Old and New Testament passages illuminates for the reader the actions of Simeon. Simeon also received, in response to his long years of prayer, a special response of Revelation, that is from the Holy Spirit. This, Bonaventure argues, is preconceived in Isaiah 30:19 and Zechariah 1:3. Simeon was also told, again by the Holy

Spirit speaking through the inspired text, that he, Simeon, would not see death until he had first seen the long-awaited Christ, as is shown in Job 19:26 and Psalm 117:17. Simeon is prompted to go to the Temple, and that he was led by the Spirit is clear from Romans 8:14. His long perseverance and life of prayer in the Temple is described by texts from the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 5:8 and 131:7. Finally, Simeon was told by the Spirit of truth, and prompted to comprehension infused with Joy, that he himself would meet the Lord in the Temple with the suddenness promised in Malachi 3:1: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed he is coming—says the Lord of hosts.”⁴⁹

The introduction of this text from Malachi is not incidental or arbitrary, as it was also the Old Testament reading (Malachi 3:1-4) for Mass for the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thus, on a very profound level, although he does not note it here, Bonaventure is linking his own interpretation of the method of the Spirit’s inspiration of Simeon to the ancient teaching of the Church implicit in the liturgy. On a practical level, we see how he is giving future preachers the exegetical tools to explain the liturgical mystery in light of the proper readings for the feast.

Now, in turning to “the content of the mystery,” which should inspire one to admiration, Bonaventure describes how Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms. Here the focus is on the devotion of the old man, who comprehends and holds onto this little child. In the exegesis that follows, we can discern an implicit use of the tradition in seeing the books of wisdom literature as reflecting the Dionysian threefold mystical path of purgation, illumination, and union.⁵⁰ As wisdom literature leads Simeon to the brink of

encounter with the Lord, paralleling its use to describe the purgative and illuminative way of the Christian journey in other texts of mystical theology, now the language of the Song of Songs is used, as it was in *The Tree of Life*, to describe the moment when prophecy, and wisdom, and justice through grace bring Simeon to union with Christ. Simeon, Bonaventure explains, “exposes himself completely to Christ.”⁵¹ Thus Simeon fulfills what Song of Songs 8:6 says, about having a seal on his heart and also his arm. Then, Bonaventure goes beyond the text to exclaim how Christ is to be comprehended and held with both arms, congruous with the verse Song of Songs 3:4 about not letting go. This demonstrates how like Simeon, the Christian must serve God with both hands and all of our strength, to work and battle like in Nehemiah 4:17.⁵²

Bonaventure after some further analysis of Simeon then turns to the *Nunc Dimittis* itself, sung by a Simeon full of the Holy Spirit. He discusses at length, informed by the same combination of texts from both Testaments, how the canticle demonstrates: 1) the spiritual consolation of the old; and 2) the exalted commendation of the infant, i.e. “because mine eyes have seen their salvation.”

Simeon, Bonaventure says, can use the words of Genesis 46:30, that now he could die happy and have peace because he was waiting for nothing else. Simeon makes it clear that from Christ flows salvation, glory, and praise. And this salvation is for all peoples, light for Gentiles and glory for Israelites, as is shown by various passages from Isaiah and the Psalms.⁵³ Amidst this rather detailed and nuanced discussion, Bonaventure invokes the Old Testament passage Esther 8:16-17 to aptly describe this moment of Simeon’s ecstatic song: “but to the Jews a new light seemed to arise: joy and honour and dancing among all peoples.” This interpretation of Esther, combined as it was with the implicit

wedding imagery of the Song of Songs, would seem to explain the previously-mentioned dancing referred to in *The Tree of Life*. The story of Esther could be seen in the Latin tradition as the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in the Church, and this likely informs Bonaventure's exegesis here.⁵⁴ (The modern reader is perhaps immediately moved to consider the parallel of a rabbi dancing with the Torah scroll during the Jewish liturgy, something which Bonaventure, one imagines, would be delighted to reflect upon!) It is also a clear example of how in his academic exegesis, Bonaventure brings out a point more explicitly that underlies specific parts of his devotional exegesis.

Bonaventure proceeds to show how this canticle, besides bringing peace to console an elderly man, proclaims universal salvation and light for the Gentiles and glory for Israel, manifesting divine clemency, wisdom and power, respectively. Furthermore, Bonaventure sums up brilliantly how this canticle is a summary of the whole gospel, and why (with the other Lukan canticles at different liturgical hours) the Church sings it every single night as part of her liturgical prayer at Compline:

“Thus in this canticle Christ is praised as peace, salvation, light and glory. He is peace, because he is the mediator. He is salvation, because he is the redeemer. He is light, because he is the teacher. He is glory, because he is the rewarder. And in these four consist the perfect commendation and magnification of Christ, indeed the most brief capsulation of the entire evangelical story: incarnation in peace; preaching in light; redemption in salvation; resurrection in glory.

“And because this canticle contains in itself the fullness of the praise of Christ, and the consolation of a dying old man, it is, therefore, sung in the evening at Compline. Wherefore, these three canticles of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon are ordered so that one begins where the other leaves off: the first at Vespers, the second in the morning, and third in the evening. Also it is signified in this that every station in life must praise God for the incarnation: virgins, married people, and widows; those in contemplative life, prelates, those in active life; lay and clerics and religious, who must be consecrated to God.”⁵⁵

Bonaventure proceeds to discuss the threefold effects of the prophecy on Mary and Joseph, in terms of 1) the consolation of the prophetic blessing; b) the mystery of the

Lord's passion; and c) the witness of the mother's compassion. Concerning the blessing, he presents three possible interpretations, all of which have Scriptural support: 1) that the blessing is meant to console and commend and comfort, not terrify; 2) that he blessed them to signify that in Christ all the blessings of the patriarchs have been fulfilled; and 3) that he blessed them to insinuate that through Christ's passion we are freed from every malediction.⁵⁶ It is instructive of his method that he offers three possible interpretations of a passage, each with biblical support, without making a definitive judgment.

Bonaventure then proceeds to discuss the prophecy of the passion given by Simeon to Mary, and the various shades of meaning and doctrine involved. From there he gives a nuanced and rich discussion of the figure of the prophetess Anna, and the need and appropriateness for various types of witnesses, of all ages, states of life and both genders, in the whole narrative of the nativity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident how in his exegesis of this one mystery, Bonaventure demonstrates the hermeneutical principles enunciated in the *Breviloquium* and elsewhere. His treatment of the episode of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and in particular the words and actions of Simeon, in his devotional exegesis (e.g. *The Tree of Life*) can only be fully understood in light of his academic commentary on the gospel episode, a point not usually emphasized by scholars. Bonaventure's reading of Esther 8:16-17 as a foreshadowing of Simeon's dancing not only displays his hermeneutical method at work, but also empowers him to go beyond the letter of the Lukan text and utilize Old Testament imagery to help better visualize one of the most iconic moments in Christ's

early life. It also becomes apparent how in an exemplary fashion, Bonaventure could adapt his exegesis to a variety of audiences, while showing a fundamental consistency of exegetical conclusions that were at all times intended to bring out both the content, deeper meaning, and appropriate response to the truths of Scripture presented to the humble, willing and attentive reader. In this rich exposition of the *Nunc Dimittis*, Bonaventure teaches that Simeon's ecstatic and inspired canticle, prayed by the Church every night at Compline, does nothing less than most perfectly encapsulate the central message of the entire gospel, from the Incarnation to the Resurrection and eternal life. He demonstrates how this message is appropriately conveyed in various literary genres through an integration and mutual enrichment of all aspects of Christian intellectual and spiritual life.

NOTES

¹ For the most recent overview, Jacques Guy Bougerol, "Bonaventure as Exegete" in, *A Companion to Bonaventure*, eds. Jay M. Hammond, J.A. Wayne Hellmann, and Jared Goff, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 167-188. For a fresh perspective on the role of Bonaventure's view of Scripture in his theology and comparison with his contemporary Thomas Aquinas, see Robert J. Wozniak, "An Emerging Theology Between Scripture and Metaphysics: Bonaventure, Aquinas and the Scriptural Foundation of Medieval Theology," in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, eds. Piotr Roszak and Jürgen Vijgen, (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 415-434.

² Gilbert Dahan, "Genres, Forms and Various Methods in Christian Exegesis of the Middle Ages", in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996-2015), vol. 1.2, 214-216.

³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. and eds. Campion Murray and Robert Karris, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005); Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. and ed. Robert Karris, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2007); Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, trans. and ed. Robert Karris, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2001-2004).

⁴ Of the many relevant articles by Robert J. Karris, see in particular "St Bonaventure as Biblical Interpreter: His Methods, Wit, and Wisdom," *Franciscan Studies* 60 (2002), 159-206. See now Douglas Dales, *Divine Remaking: St Bonaventure and the Gospel of Luke* (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 2017).

⁵ Ryan A. Brandt, "Reading Scripture Spiritually: Bonaventure, the Quadriga, and Spiritual Formation Today," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 10 (2017), 12-32, at 12.

⁶ Ilia Delio, "Is Spirituality the Future of Theology? Insights from Bonaventure," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8 (2008), 148-155, at 149.

- ⁷ Robert J. Karris, "Gospel of Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph E. Fitzmyr and Roland E. Murphy, (G. Chapman, 1990), 683.
- ⁸ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, p. 193. For the Latin, *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*. (Quarrachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882-1902), vol. VII, 60. Henceforth referred to as *Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae*, with page number. The Quarrachi edition in general will henceforth be referred to as *Opera Omnia*.
- ⁹ English translation, henceforth referred to as *Tree of Life*, found in Bonaventure, *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God; The Tree of Life; The Life of St. Francis*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978). For the Latin text, henceforth *Lignum Vitae*, see *Opera Omnia* vol. VIII, 68-86.
- ¹⁰ Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia* vol. IX, 633-657.
- ¹¹ Bonaventure, *De Quinque Festivitatibus Pueri Iesu*, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. VIII, 88-95.
- ¹² In his Sermons for the Purification and tract on the *Five Feasts of the Child Jesus*, Bonaventure does not treat Simeon.
- ¹³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on Gospel of Luke*, 4. For the context of this statement vis-à-vis Stephen Langton, Peter Comestor and Peter Cantor, as well as the early Franciscans, see Bougerol, "Bonaventure as Exegete," 168-174.
- ¹⁴ Robert J. Karris, "St Bonaventure as Biblical Interpreter," 163.
- ¹⁵ Seminal studies of the medieval senses of Scripture include Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: Volume I The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Marc Sebanc, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998) originally published in 1959; and Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952). For an excellent discussion of recent scholarship in this area, see Christopher Ocker and Kevin Madigan, "After Beryl Smalley: Thirty Years of Medieval Exegesis, 1984-2013," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 2 (2015), 87-130.
- ¹⁶ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. Dominic V. Monti, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), 1-22. See Bougerol, "Bonaventure as Exegete", 175-179; Christopher Cullen, *Bonaventure* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2006), 113-117.
- ¹⁷ Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," in *A Companion to Bonaventure*, 57.
- ¹⁸ For overviews, see Ewert Cousins, *The Tree of Life*, pp. 34-37; Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," 42-44.
- ¹⁹ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, 131. All scriptural quotations follow those of the cited translations of Bonaventure's work.
- ²⁰ Bonaventure, *Lignum Vitae*, 72.
- ²¹ "Et erat pater ejus et mater mirantes super his quae dicebantur de illo" (Luke 2:33).
- ²² "Exulta igitur et tu cum illo beato sene et Anna longaeva; procede in occursum Matris et Parvuli." Bonaventure, *Lignum Vitae*, 72.
- ²³ Bonaventure *Tree of Life*, 131.
- ²⁴ "...vincat vercundiam amor, depellat timorem affectus. Accipias et tu infantem in ulnas tuas dicasque cum sponsa: *Tenui eum nec dimittam*. Tripudia cum illo sanctissimo sene ac concine: *Nunc dimittis servum suum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace*." Bonaventure, *Lignum Vitae*, 72.
- ²⁵ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, 132-133.
- ²⁶ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, 132.
- ²⁷ Bonaventure, *Tree of Life*, 133.
- ²⁸ On the possibility that Bonaventure himself wrote this hymn, see Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," 49.
- ²⁹ *Tree of Life*, 153.
- ³⁰ See Gilbert Dahan, "Genres, Forms and Various Methods in Christian Exegesis of the Middle Ages," 196-216.
- ³¹ Robert J. Karris, "St Bonaventure as Biblical Interpreter," 160.
- ³² François Bovon is a notable exception. See e.g. his *Luke I: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*. trans. Christine Thomas, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), xxxi.
- ³³ Robert J. Karris, "St Bonaventure as Biblical Interpreter," 162.
- ³⁴ Marianne Schlosser, "Bonaventure: Life and Works," 11. The Quaracchi editors, followed by Robert Karris in his translation, have done a commendable job of indicating these sources. Brandt, "Reading Scripture Spiritually," 12-32, provides an excellent analysis of Bonaventure's methodology in this commentary, and an argument for its relevance today.
- ³⁵ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 12.

³⁶ See e.g. Ambroise Nguyen Van Si, *The Theology of the Imitation of Christ According to St. Bonaventure*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1997).

³⁷ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 173.

³⁸ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 173-178.

³⁹ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 180-181.

⁴⁰ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 182-183.

⁴¹ “Therefore in this cleansing and tarrying and offering is signified that the person who is cleansed from pride and negligence is disposed to ascend to the contemplation of God and to descend to a consideration of himself. And ascending on high, he moans out of love and devotion. And descending from on high, he moans out of contrition and compassion. And in these consists the perfection of the soul that is holy and dedicated to God.” Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 184.

⁴² Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 185. As the Latin has it: “Circa Simeonis testimonium tria introducuntur: primum *testificantis meritum* solidans ad credendum; secundum est, *testificationis praeconium* elevans ad admirandum... Tertium est *praeconii temperamentum* inclinans ad compatiendum.” *Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae*, 58.

⁴³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 185.

⁴⁴ Bonaventure, *Commentary on Gospel of Luke*, 186.

⁴⁵ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 186.

⁴⁶ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 186.

⁴⁷ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 187. “Unde sibi maxime dicebat Spiritus sanctus illud Habacuc etc.,” *Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae*, 58.

⁴⁸ *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 187-188.

⁴⁹ *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 188.

⁵⁰ For some suggestive remarks on Bonaventure’s place in this tradition, which in essence dates back to Origen, see Roland Murphy, ed., *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature: Essays by Beryl Smalley* (Scholars Press Reprint, 1986), 39-46; the original published in *Dominican Studies* 3 (1950) 41-77.

⁵¹ “...Christo exposuit se totum.” Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Evangelium Lucae*, 59.

⁵² Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 189.

⁵³ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 189-192.

⁵⁴ Jerome in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Prophet Zephaniah (Sophonias)*, had identified Esther, along with Judith, as a type of the Church (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 25, col. 1337b). Rabanus Maurus, the only earlier Latin writer to comment upon this book at length, in his *Explanation of the Book of Esther*, does hint at this when he writes, “[and] therefore, through God’s mercy, the number of the faithful increases daily and the flocks of the church are filled. The power of the Christian name causes terror among infidels and joy among believers the world over.” Marco Conti, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, Volume V* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 394 (PL 109, col. 664C-D).

⁵⁵ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 193.

⁵⁶ Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 194-195.